In Alaska's Rain Belt

BY WILFRED H. OSGOOD

ALASKA and California naturally suggest contrast, particularly in respect to climate. Yet Alaska, in its various parts, like California, furnishes a great variety of weather. Each has its regions of comparative heat, cold, aridity, and humidity. California, however, goes to extremes in the matter of heat and aridity, while Alaska takes the palm for cold and humidity.

From the collector's standpoint, aridity and humidity are more important considerations than heat and cold. One who has worked in both humid and arid regions can scarcely refrain from drawing comparisons. Both have their attractive features and in point of interest each has many claims, but on the practical side the arid or semi-arid region commends itself preeminently. Collectors who work in central and southern California, for example, seem to have things their own way. They are in a paradise for camping and collecting. They sleep under the stars every night and travel where they will. To be sure they must look for water occasionally, but usually they know where to find it. Birds are easily secured and nests easily found. After a successful morning, the happy collector sits him down anywhere that suits his fancy and prepares his specimens. These, once prepared, soon dry and may be packed away safely.

In the humid region, the collector must travel largely by water; his entire outfit must be enclosed in waterproofing, his guns, ammunition, and photographic material requiring special care. He always pitches a tent at night and goes to sleep on his rubber blanket to the music of the rain pattering on the canvas. In the morning he crawls out in the wet and after much trouble starts a smouldering fire. His clothes are soaked much of the time; and his specimens are wet and bedraggled before he begins work on them, and when prepared, however nicely, soon become mushy, moldy caricatures requiring constant care for weeks after they are collected.

This is not a recital of personal troubles, though I have experienced them all many times; it is merely the natural comparison that comes to mind when one undertakes to write for a California journal an account of collecting in the humid coast belt of Alaska.

In the spring of 1903, while waiting for the opening of navigation on the Yukon, I made a short trip to Prince of Wales Island. This is one of the southernmost of the group known on maps as the Alexander Archipelago and with the exception of Kodiak, is the largest of the many islands scattered so thickly along Alaska's coast. It is in the heart of the rain belt, and, as I had been there before, I knew what to expect. When the sun shines it is one of the most beautiful regions in the world, but so rarely does this occur that it becomes an event and the clear air and bright light seem like food and drink. The great humidity is accompanied by a comparative evenness of temperature throughout the year. Consequently vegetation is luxuriant. The magnificent forests are chiefly of coniferous trees, often festooned with mosses and lichens and rising from tangles of shrubs. The rank growths can scarcely be duplicated outside the tropics and are so difficult to penetrate that even the Indians seldom attempt to go far from the coast.

My most pleasant ornithological experiences on Prince of Wales Island were crowded into two days late in May, when I went by canoe to the head of Twelve Mile Arm, a continuation of Kasaan Bay, which is the most important indentation on the east coast of the island. Leaving the small mining settlement of Hollis

a little too late to get much assistance from the ebbing tide, we pulled out from the protected harbor into the narrow forest-girt fiord, hoping for a fair wind on the long stretch ahead of us. But the wind was not fair—it never is, it seems, except for the fellow going the other way—and there was nothing for it but to sail with the old reliable 'ash breeze.' So we bent to it for nearly four hours, hugging the shore, taking every lee and eddy, and buffeting the combined wind and tide only when it could not be avoided. It was raining as was to be expected, but we were prepared for it; ourselves incased in oilskins, our blankets and provisions in waterproof canvas bags, and our guns well smeared with grease and lying within reach under a tarpaulin. Along the Arm we saw a few common water birds. Now and then a black-throated loon bobbed up, and as it dove on our approach we amused ourselves in the usual way speculating as to where it would reappear. Small parties of the chunky little marbled murrelets floated unconcernedly over the choppy water, until we came within the danger limit, and then quickly disappeared beneath the surface. Clumsy scoters, both the American and the white-winged, were seen here and there. Once a flock of a dozen or more scaup ducks flew over, and now and then an American merganser streaked by. Spotted sandpipers flitted along the shore from one point to another and mingled their musical little whistles with the harsh cries of the abundant and insistent ravens. From the depths of the forest occasionally came the cries of crested jays or perhaps from afar off the high-pitched trill of the varied thrush.

A stream enters the head of the Arm and winds through open grassy flats for the last mile of its course. A few straggling trees thrive on elevated knolls about the border of the flats and at high tide become insular. Most of the year these flats are beautiful open meadows, being entirely inundated only by the extreme high tides of spring. Bird life is usually somewhat concentrated at the head of such a long inlet, and this case was no exception. As we approached, a large flock of crows (*Corvus caurinus*) started from a clump of detached trees and wheeled slowly over the meadow cawing vociferously. Their alarm was soon communicated to hundreds of geese which we could now plainly see scattered over the flats and along the muddy banks of the tidal sloughs. In another moment, with mingled cawing and cackling and now and then an added cry from a gull, the place was a pandemonium. A few flocks of the geese, which were all of the white-cheeked variety (*Branta c. occidentalis*), took flight but many remained on the flat walking about, craning their necks, and cackling in much concern.

It was nearly night and still raining, so on discovering a deserted cabin near the beach, we quickly put ashore and camped in its shelter. Dry wood had evidently been at a premium here, for the interior of the cabin was stripped of nearly everything burnable that would not sacrifice shelter. Even the floor, which was several feet above the ground, had been burned piecemeal by successive camping parties until only a few boards remained. We also levied a small tribute and managed to keep enough blaze to cook our meal and furnish light. By careful adjustment our blankets were so spread on the remnants of the floor that it was possible to roll in without dropping through to the ground. Soon the tide rose and we lay and listened to the lap of the water as it came nearer and nearer the house, shivering to think of the catastrophe that might occur should we roll over too far while asleep. However sleep soon came, followed without conscious intermission by waking at daylight.

It was muggy in the morning but not raining and we were soon exploring the flats. The geese were again scattered about feeding and in such large numbers that they appeared like the flocks one sees in the fall of the year. Still I

knew they must be breeding, and it was not long before proof was secured. On a little high tide island supporting a single spruce tree, an old goose was flushed from her nest of five eggs. She floundered out of the thick branches about the base of the tree with a great commotion and made off to join the flocks at the upper end of the flat. A short search on hands and knees under the tree revealed the nest and the warm eggs. The nest was a slight hollow in the sandy ground, lined with spruce needles, bits of dead grass, vegetable refuse, and a small quantity of down and feathers. In completeness and compactness it could not compare with the nests of many of our ducks. This was on May 22 and the eggs were quite fresh. Later in the day, another nest freshly made but without eggs was found in an exactly similar location. On returning to the first nest toward evening we failed to surprise the bird again, but found the eggs carefully covered with feathers.

We soon left the flats and spent the greater part of the day on the mountains in search of ptarmigan, which we had been told were to be found about timberline. After a fierce tussle with the thick undergrowth, we finally emerged in a series of beautiful open glades high up on the mountain and above them found open slopes with banks of snow scattered about. We crossed many of these glades and saw much of interest but failed to see any ptarmigan, though our doubts as to their occurrence were set at rest by finding several shed feathers, pure white and unmistakable.

On the way down the mountain I was proceeding cautiously along a well beaten deer trail in hopes of seeing a deer or even a bear, as signs of them were numerous, when a whirr of wings at one side and not three feet from the trail, brought me to a standstill and caused me to whirl in my tracks in time to see a grouse pass through the network of branches and alight in a nearby hemlock. I lost no time in bringing it to the ground and was both pleased and surprised to find it a *Canachites*, of what species I did not feel certain since it was a female. I even entertained the thought that it might represent a new species. At least it was new to that part of Alaska and possibly to the Territory. Subsequent comparison showed it to be *Canachites franklini*, previously unknown from any part of Alaska. Careful examination of the ground from which it was flushed brought to light its nest, a depression in a bed of moss, thickly overlaid with dead spruce needles, and well sheltered by a tiny seedling spruce. It contained five eggs which I wrapped in a handkerchief and placed in the top of my hat. The return through the thick woods was somewhat retarded by this breakable burden, but after several hours of carefully threading the labyrinth, I reached camp.

On the mountain many small birds were seen, the most important being: *Dryobates v. picoideus*, *Sphyrapicus r. notkensis*, *Empidonax difficilis*, *Cyanocitta s. carlottæ*, *Junco h. oreganus*, *Helminthophila c. lutescens*, *Dendroica townsendi*, *Wilsonia p. pileolata*, *Olbiorchilus h. pacificus*, *Parus rufescens*, *Hylocichla guttata*, and *Ixoreus nævius*.

The next morning the boat was loaded for the return to Hollis. Just as we were starting, a small hawk, doubtless a black merlin (*Falco c. suckleyi*), came soaring over the flat toward us. This was a bird I had long been looking for and I wanted it, in fact I 'wanted it bad'. Hastily taking a couple of shells from a wet pocket of my shooting coat, I started to put them into the gun, but they were swelled by the dampness and when about half way in stuck fast and would neither go in nor come out. Meanwhile the bird seemed to understand and took an unusual interest in us, approaching nearer and nearer and finally sailing almost directly over the boat. And I stood there trying with might and main first to get those shells in and then desperately wrenching to get them out. All the while I

could think of nothing but the well known picture called 'The Tight Shell,' which one sees advertised in the sporting journals. The bird is perhaps still at large, and the shells, which finally did go in, were rapidly discharged at the empty air, making a fitting climax to a short but vigorous series of atmospheric disturbances that had preceded them.

Washington, D. C.

Midwinter Birds on the Mojave Desert

BY JOSEPH MAILLIARD AND JOSEPH GRINNELL

THE midwinter collecting trip of 1903-04 had been so pleasantly participated in by the authors of this article that it was proposed to repeat the experience the following year, with the difference of a change of base, and the addition of a student assistant for each of us. After thinking over various localities it was decided that Victorville, near the southern edge of the Mojave Desert would probably prove an interesting point, and one at which but little work had ever been done. This locality was near enough to the bases of the San Bernardino and San Gabriel Ranges so that mountain birds should be found during stormy weather dispersed at the lower levels along with northern visitants and the resident desert species.

Victorville is a small settlement on the line of the A. T. & S. F. railroad between Barstow and San Bernardino, thirty-seven miles south of the former. The Mojave River runs past the place, cutting through some picturesque rocks just above the town, and finally loses itself in the desert sands below Barstow. Its source is in the wood-covered San Bernardino Mountains to the south, and along its banks are groves of cottonwoods, many of these trees being of large size and the groves quite extensive in places. On each side of the river the desert stretches away in a varied assortment of plains, rolling hills, and bare rocky mountains. The usual desert bushes are but thinly scattered over its surface, affording little cover for the permanently resident birds; and while the tree yuccas are in evidence, chiefly towards the south, they are much less numerous than we had hoped to find them.

The party consisted of the authors and three students from the Throop Polytechnic Institute of Pasadena. One of these, Philip Pinger, was Mr. Mailliard's assistant; another, Joseph Dixon, Mr. Grinnell's; while the third, Walter P. Taylor, ornithologized on his own account. Owing to the scarcity of cover in the desert proper, birds proved very scarce there, and we soon found that most of our collecting would have to be done among the cottonwoods along the river, and about the large alfalfa field two miles north of town. A small irrigating ditch from the river above ran through this field, with seepage-sinks here and there containing reeds and willows, and we discovered that these were the abiding places of numerous song sparrows, which, when disturbed or when feeding, scattered out to weed patches in the vicinity. These birds had evidently come from many parts of the west, so that this locality seemed to serve as a sort of winter meeting place for them. We captured what looked to be quite a variety, but which finally worked down to three races, with intermediate examples, as shown in the annotated list to follow.